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# November in Kansas

*Shelby Prindaville*

It is sophomore year of high school, it is November in Kansas, and my mother has just returned from Sarah Ann's Hallmark Store with five menorahs. Inventory for the Christmas season just arrived, including these five fancy sterling silver candelabras that represent Hallmark's tolerance for other religions and something to do with oil. The owner knew it would be more expensive to ship them back to the franchise headquarters than to just give them to the one Jewish family she knew in town, and she had called my mother earlier today and asked her to come pick them up. My mother didn't ask whether or not there were any Kwanzaa kinaras, and I wonder whether or not the one black family in town received a similar phone call.

The new menorahs are pretty. Our menorah, the one that we have used forever, is tarnished brass with foggy jewels inset into the swirling metallic design. Multi-colored wax drippings clog the crevices. These menorahs are modern, shiny, understated, with smooth bodies and arms that branch out into a decorative flourish at the candleholders. They are wax-free.

My mother gives me one, and my sister one, and keeps one for herself. There are two left. My father, an ex-Catholic turned atheist, does not want one. My mother begins to catalogue the Jews that she knows live here. It is not hard to do. There are the Cohens, who moved in about a month ago, and the deRocheport-Reynolds, who gave a speech at school one year about Hanukkah, Anne Frank, pickled beets, and hardtack. She calls each family and drops off their brand-new, free menorahs.

I gave a speech every year in elementary school about Hanukkah. It was a speech my mother had handwritten on a piece of paper, and I dutifully read it to the class, stumbling over the pronunciations and finishing up with

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a rendition of *Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel*. By middle school, I stopped giving the speech, and the deRocheport-Reynolds stepped in for a year with their memorable version. Then we all stopped.

It is senior year in high school, it is December in Kansas, and I want to put up Christmas lights on our house. My mother throws a fit. Just last year, she put up a small Santa with LED lights on our front lawn. We have always had a Christmas tree surrounded by Christmas presents (and when we were younger, a model train). We bake Christmas cookies and sing Christmas carols on school field trips to the nursing homes and Main Street businesses. Why couldn't we stop the embarrassment of the twelve-inch glowing Santa dwarfed by our house and lawn and trees, and actually decorate the house and trees? She wouldn't even have to help – my father and I could get it done. But no. She is Jewish, and she will not have her Jewish house decorated with Christmas lights. She is Jewish, damn it, even if she doesn't observe any Jewish rituals, often forgets about Yom Kippur, and usually only makes it halfway into Hanukkah before forgetting to light more candles.

Very few people know that I am Jewish. Most people at my high school know a lot about me. I live in a small, rural town, with a sister who went to college out of state. I get good grades, and I participate in almost every extracurricular activity – the only ones I'm not a part of are FFA (the Future Farmers Association) and the Christian Prayer group. But no one remembers those awkward elementary school speeches about the Maccabees, and I don't remind them.

I am not ashamed of being Jewish. I am not proud of it. I barely identify with it, and see no reason to call attention to a part of myself that I don't even fully understand. I am agnostic, I have been to a temple exactly once in my life, and if you asked me to name more than three Jewish holidays I could not answer you, even though I am on the Quiz Bowl team. I know more about Christianity, and what does being Jewish *mean* if there's no community and all I've got is a handful of Yiddish words and a recollection of a lot of gefilte fish?

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Now, I'm a vegetarian.

It is the summer of 2007, I am at home in Kansas, and my mother is telling me about how she was at lunch with some coworkers who were discussing their upcoming interior decoration plans. One woman's house has swastika wallpapering, and both coworkers determined that it would be a shame to remove it. My mother couldn't even fully verbalize her offense. The women couldn't understand it.

People in Kansas use the word "jew" as a verb. As in, you better not "jew" me out of my money. I got into a verbal altercation in school one day with a boy three years younger than me who didn't understand what he was saying. Once I explained it to him, he said that he didn't really care and would say it again. I've used the word "gyp."

When I came to Penn, I was shocked by the Jewish community. By its presence. By its majority. Classes at Penn are cancelled due to holidays I didn't know existed. When I lived in Kansas, I wasn't really Jewish because there was no Judaism. Now that I live at Penn, I'm not really Jewish because so many people are so Jewish.

We never used those three shiny new minority menorahs. One of them sits in our living room, behind the lamp. I think the other two are somewhere in our attic.

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